

The Telegraph

EXHIBITIONS

Italian art's other Michelangelo

Mark Hudson
meets an artist
bringing his vision
of a better world to
Blenheim Palace

The philosopher king of Italian art sits in his palace of mirrors in the foothills of the Italian Alps. Michelangelo Pistoletto's private foundation, the Cittadellarte, occupies an abandoned woollen mill in his hometown Biella. Below it, the Po Valley stretches into the distance, above rise the stark outlines of alpine peaks. It's an appropriate location for an artist whose work is all about the reconciliation of opposites.

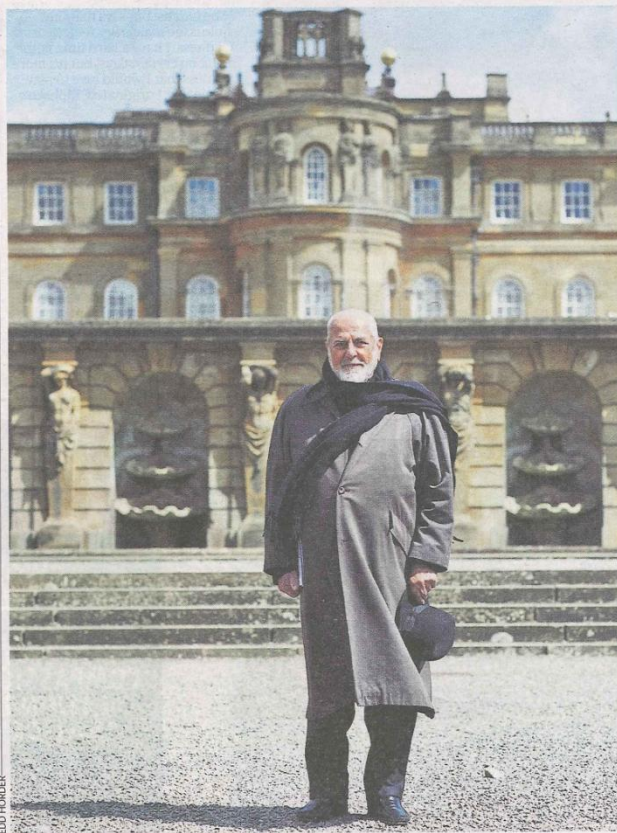
"Everything in my work comes back to the mirror," says Pistoletto, an authoritative, silver-bearded 83-year-old dressed all in black but with a kindly twinkle in his eye. "The mirror shows us the past and the future and, in between, the present – the space of action," he continues in grandiose terms that I soon discover are typical. "We have to find a balance between the rational and the emotional, and art has a vital role in that."

Pistoletto's most famous works are his "mirror paintings", a series of life-size human figures silkscreened on to polished steel plates, in which the reflected viewer becomes a participant in the picture. First exhibited in 1962, they were among the key images of *Arte Povera* (Poor Art), a reaction against the consumer culture that had increasingly dominated post-war Italy – and the country's most important modern art movement.

Today, many of these artworks are housed in the Cittadellarte, which Pistoletto created in 1998, as a "laboratory" where artists, designers and architects can pursue ecologically sustainable projects with the aim of unifying all aspects of human existence no less. Walking through its galleries, studios and workshops you encounter mirrors at every turn: a mirrored outline of the Mediterranean is used as a conference table; a bronze statue of a Roman emperor stands on a landing, apparently in conversation with his reflection.

This month Pistoletto is bringing his vision to a most unlikely venue: Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, the birthplace of Winston Churchill. Though the marble and gilt interiors of Britain's grandest stately home may seem an odd fit for an artist associated with the anti-capitalist struggles of the Sixties, Pistoletto himself is unfazed.

"It's an amazing place: the architecture, the landscape. You can feel the presence of history,"



'You can feel the presence of history': Michelangelo Pistoletto outside Blenheim Palace, where his famous 'mirror paintings', below left, will be on show. Below, Monumentino, 1968-86

almost as though the mirror in which he would study himself were muscling into the frame. "That," he says, "was the beginning of the mirror paintings". In the early Sixties, these cool, visual-punning works found immediate critical and popular favour, particularly in America, where he was taken on by the great Pop Art dealer, Leo Castelli. For a time he was the sole European on a quintessentially American art scene, rubbing shoulders with Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

"One day Castelli said to me, you've had a lot of success, but you need to forget you're a European," Pistoletto tells me. "The implication was that if an artist was good he had to become American. Up to that point I'd never thought of myself as European. Now I realised I didn't want to renounce that identity."

Instead, he threw himself into *Arte Povera* alongside his countrymen Mario Merz and Giuseppe Penone. "We wanted to focus on the concentration of energy through nature, using organic and discarded materials," he says. "Rather than the glorification of the capitalist economy – or the communist one for that matter."

The apotheosis of this engagement is the *Third Paradise*.

Pistoletto's great transformational art project, the looping symbol of which – with two smaller circles set on either side of a larger "O" – will be seen floating over Blenheim's majestic entrance hall. Displayed around the Cittadellarte in various forms, from a loaf of bread to a vast floor-filling installation, this esoteric logo represents Pistoletto's idea that the so-called First Paradise, the natural world, and the Second Paradise, the man-made world, can be reconciled in a Third Paradise (represented by the central circle) for the betterment of the planet.

If it all sounds very slightly barmy, it nevertheless has a certain logic and Pistoletto, who has renounced copyright not only on the logo but on the whole concept of the Third Paradise, clearly hopes his symbol will eventually achieve the ubiquity of the CND peace sign.

"It should work like that because I think, modestly," he chuckles, "that there is no better sign to help people understand the possibilities that are in front of us. It expresses in a very simple way the reconciliation of opposites. And this desire to find a balance between the forces that are around us is a universal human need."

Michelangelo Pistoletto opens at Blenheim Palace, Oxon, on Wed. blenheimartfoundation.org.uk

he says. "And Churchill, of course, brings another element."

A positive one? "Very positive. I was a child during the war, when the French and the Americans were bombing us from the air, the Germans were shooting us on the ground, and the Fascists were forcing us to swear loyalty to God and Mussolini. Our only way of finding what was happening in the world was from the BBC, which came from so far away – like getting information from the moon. Even then I was aware of Churchill as a symbol of hope."

Delivered in a rich Italian accent, Pistoletto's conversation is at once almost absurdly highfalutin and endearingly matter-of-fact, as though transforming the world was as practical a task as, say, building a cupboard. Despite his air of intellectual curiosity, he confesses that he has "never developed the habit of reading. If I want to understand things I look at them and I do something with them. The information I need comes to me."

Pistoletto grew up in wartime Italy as the son of a deaf art restorer. When he was one, his family

moved from Biella to the nearby metropolis, Turin, and from the age of 14 he spent 12 years working in his father's workshop. Even today he prides himself on being able to tell how any painting was created, from the board or canvas upward, simply by looking at it. "Our whole existence was involved in renewing the past, bringing it back into existence," he says. "My father was a very sensitive person, very well-



read and a skilled painter, but he didn't like modern art. Only the past existed for him."

By his own account, Pistoletto was an extraordinarily passive child who "simply accepted things as they were". So how did he go on to become a leading light in such a radical art movement? "My mother was a very practical person," he says. "She could see I would struggle as an artist, so she pushed me towards advertising, which represented the future."

Pistoletto gained a position with a leading graphic designer, Armando Testa, who encouraged him to look at modern art. He devoured everything from Impressionism to the then cutting-edge creations of the Abstract Expressionists. His world-view changed immediately and he became convinced that he "didn't have to wait to find the answer to who I was from what exists in the world; I had to find out by creating something new".

In the Fifties, he began painting self-portraits in a rough-hewn manner typical of the era, but gradually the backgrounds became shinier and more monochrome,